PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER MUSIC (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
> PUBLISHER MTV GAMES/ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER HARMONIX
> RELEASE HOLIDAY

Rock Band

Twelve years ago, Alex Rigopulos and Eran Egozy founded a company not to create video games, but to explore technology that would allow non-musicians to discover music on a deeper level. Over a decade later, Harmonix is the name behind some of the most well known franchises in gaming – their company virtually synonymous with the music game genre they helped to establish. Critical triumphs Frequency and Amplitude established the familiar falling gem mechanic of later titles, though too few gamers would ever experience those early successes. Karaoke Revolution merged interactive scoring and pitch detection with the fun of singing along (badly) with our favorite tunes. In 2005, surprising its makers as much as it did the rest of the gaming industry, Guitar Hero was born and grew into a cultural phenomenon, bringing in people who had never even considered playing a video game before. With its simple to pick up gameplay, thousands of gamers were suddenly able to live out one element of their long-time rock and roll dreams – to turn the familiar air guitar experience on its head and create the illusion of playing along with the band on a real instrument. Their sequel, Guitar Hero II, expanded the fantasy to playing with a friend on bass. But what if you had even more control? What happens when all the backing tracks drop away, and you and your friends are the ones bringing music out of the silence? Those are the questions Harmonix wants to answer with its latest project. "We think of Rock Band as this amazing culmination point of the entire history of Harmonix music games," Harmonix co-founder and VP of engineering Eran Egozy explains. "We're taking all our previous concepts and jamming them all together into this colossal experience – a synthesis of everything we've ever done as a company."

The New Album

■ "Guitar Hero had a team of around 30. With Rock Band, the team is closer to 100. It's really something on just a different scale than what we've done before," Harmonix co-founder Eran Egozy explains

Rock Band may come out on only one disc, but in many ways it's like four full games in one. A solo guitar, singing, and drumming campaign can each be played independently from start to finish. In addition, a full band game is designed to allow for one huge cooperative playthrough for you and up to three friends – each of you tackling your favorite role. All four of you may be sitting together in a living room somewhere. However, this time, each one of you might be hundreds of miles apart from each other – Rock Band will feature full support for four-player online play on both 360 and PS3. You can even mix and match. Perhaps you and your brother want to play guitar and drums, but your best friend is away at college with his roommate, and they're up for bass and vocals. Any combination of off and online play will work, and each player can pick their own difficulty setting. A flexible community system will allow you to find bandmates anywhere in the world and hook up. While details remain under wraps, it seems as if the community system will offer some cool surprises in terms of sharing your band's triumphs with t

Gameplay in Rock Band should be immediat iar to anyone who's played Harmonix's other ga While the franchise names may have passed to publishers over the years, the original concepts those games still belong to Harmonix. Consequ it won't be hard to find your way when you star though several new features now deepen the e ence. Many have wondered how a full band gar present all the necessary tracks without clutterin

(Continued on

■ The HUD isn't final, but it gives a good idea how the game will handle four-player cooperative band play

OOLS OF The TRADE

The four-part rock band includes a guitarist, bassist, drummer, and vocalist. In Rock Band, you can adopt the role of any one of the four, and for the first time Harmonix is creating its own instruments for you to pick between. With Guitar Hero, publishing partner Red Octane took on the task of putting together the peripheral guitar controller. This time, Harmonix is in the driver's seat as much with the hardware as the software.

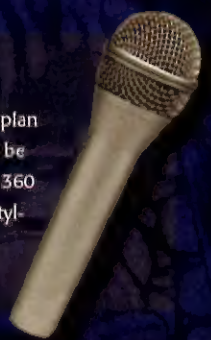
The buttons are now more imbedded in the fret board than before

he GUITAR AND BASS

he new Fender Stratocaster will ouble as the instrument for both the uitarist and bassist in Rock Band, thus acrificing some level of authenticity allow for easier switching between bles in the band. Xbox 360 owners will e happy to know that their X-Plorer uitar controllers they spent so much oney on for Guitar Hero II will defi-itely work for Rock Band. However, could be tough to not run out and rab the new controller and the new atures that go along with it. Through partnership with Fender Guitars, the ock Band guitar is an almost exact ¾ plica Strat. At a slight distance, some ight not recognize the difference, om its trademark headstock shape to e cutaways in the body to allow for gh fret access. Five familiar buttons ominate the lower frets, their colors ow only visible on the side of the et-board. Five new buttons sit high ove near the guitar body. While the same colors adorn these buttons, a new feature in the game will allow players to jump to these high frets during certain challenging solo lines and play through those sections using only hammer-ons and pull-offs, freeing you from the required coordination with your strum bar. The signature Fender five-way switch has also been added. By shopping at the in-game store, you'll be able to purchase several virtual effects pedals, such as flange, wah, chorus, or echo. These can then be applied during your song by moving the five-way switch to your desired effect, further personalizing the sound you create. Two of the knobs near the base of the body are now replaced by the Start and Select (Back) buttons, making it easy once again to palm the Select button to deploy star power, like with the original PS2 Guitar Hero controller. All told, it's a remarkably cool and flexible peripheral.

he MICROPHONE

thing too exciting here, other than the fact that Harmonix does plan release a Rock Band branded mic. Other USB microphones will be pported, but Harmonix will probably not allow the usage of the 360 adset mic – its fidelity just isn't very good. What sets the vocal styl-gs of Rock Band apart isn't the mic, but the word detection and ping mechanic built into the gameplay (see p. 67)



Concept mic only

The DRUMS

While Harmonix hadn't finalized every aspect of final drum set, they did have a working prototype that is unlikely to change dramatically before release. For purposes of consistency in laying out the notes, there doesn't appear to be a huge amount of flexibility for moving around the different pads. With that said, they've set up the drums to emulate the traditional set-up of a normal kit. The left-most pad, colored red, is your snare. Moving left from there, the yellow, blue, and green pads share duties as cymbals and toms, although when needed the yellow will almost always double as the high hat, and the far right green pad serves as the crash cymbal. A set of real wooden drum sticks will ship with the unit, letting you bang away to your heart's content. A firm metal stand holds the unit up, and can be adjusted to your height preference. A lower piece of the stand can be removed so that the whole unit will sit not on the floor, but instead on a nearby coffee table. Below, a single kick pedal introduces the challenge of a third limb in action, completing the set. "If you've played the game for several months, and you're playing on hard or expert, then you're really playing the drums," co-founder Rigopulos excitedly tells us. "We could sit you down at a real drum set and have you start playing. That, as a payoff for playing a video game, is f---ing incredible!"

This isn't an exact representation of the drum set – Harmonix should reveal the final design soon. We crafted this picture from memory based on the time we played with the prototype

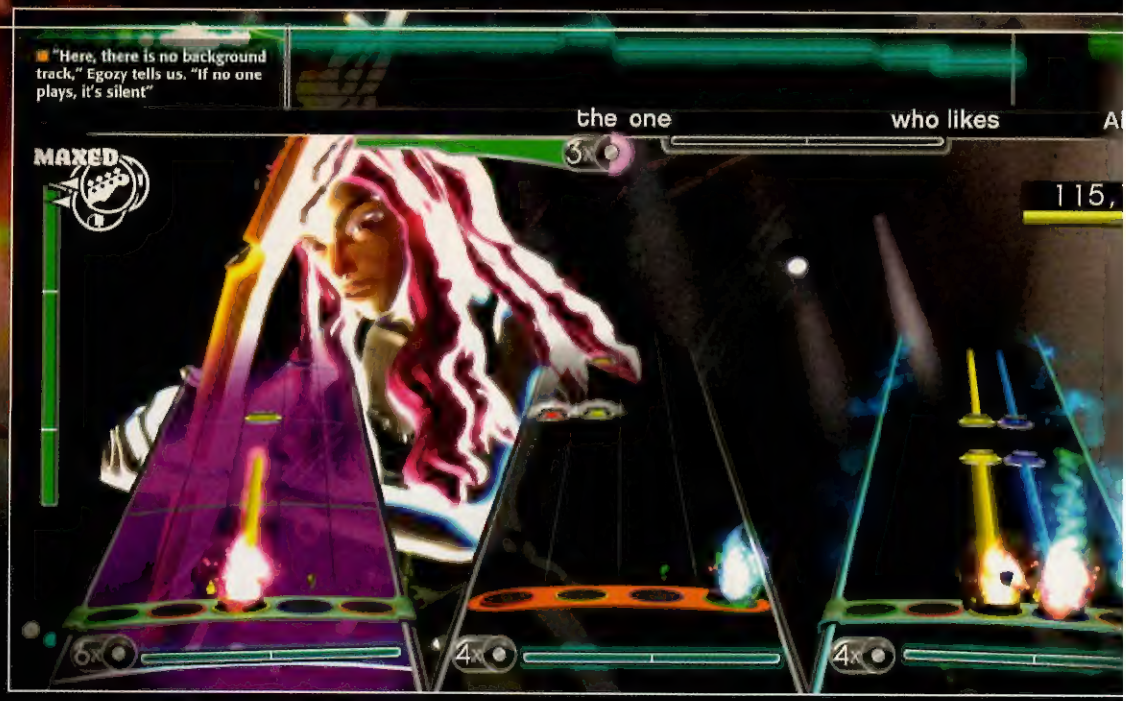
Artist's Rendition

(Continued from page 64)

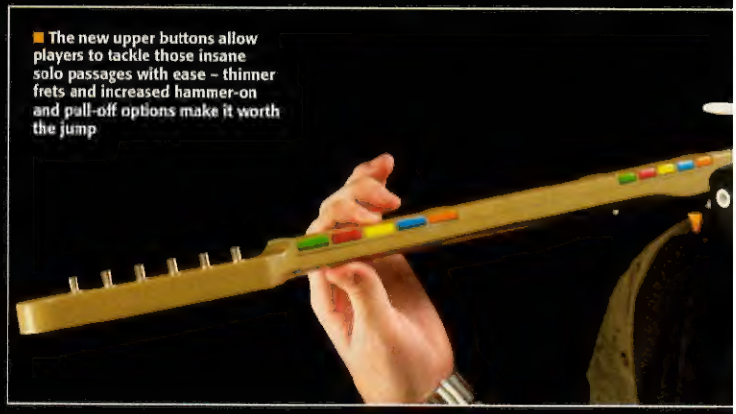
screen. The solution is relatively simple. In the version of the game we saw, the "fret boards" that slowly descend down the screen are now transparent, in order to better show off the exciting visual content behind them. Much like the stage setup of a real band, the guitar and bass tracks flow down the left and right sides of the screen, while the central track is reserved for drums. Flowing from right to left along the top of the screen are the vocal melody and lyrics, very much in the same fashion as we've seen in Karaoke Revolution.

As with previous games, guitarists and bassists will juggle up to five different colored gems as they descend. Newly added are the specially designated solo sections, which can be attempted on the new upper five frets. Fleshing out the customization of the sound provided by the whammy bar, the five-way switch allows for up to five different self-applied effects to the sound. As before, a well-timed tilt of the guitar sends you into some version of star power, but the team hasn't decided yet what to call this powerful overdrive mode.

Vocalists sing along to the rock tunes as they always have. Now, however, a

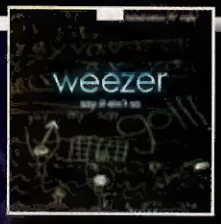


■ "Here, there is no background track," Egozy tells us. "If no one plays, it's silent"



■ The new upper buttons allow players to tackle those insane solo passages with ease – thinner frets and increased hammer-on and pull-off options make it worth the jump

ALL ABOUT The Music

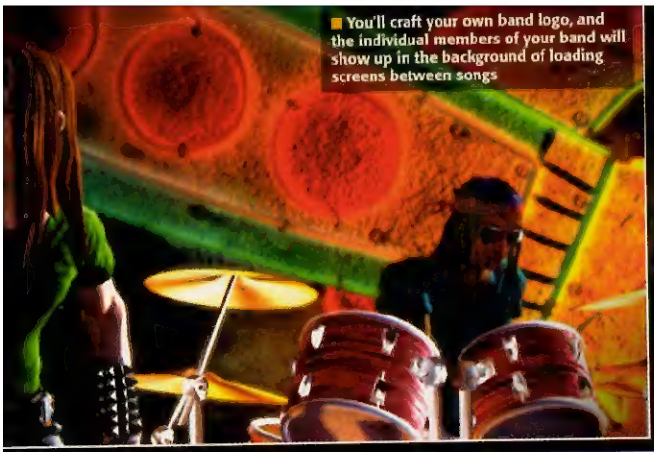


"The types of songs that we're looking for have a slightly different bent than with Guitar Hero II. For Guitar Hero, it was always about getting songs that people identified as these classic iconic guitar moments," Egozy tells us. "As for Rock Band, that'll still be the case with certain songs, but it's really all about the band, not necessarily what any one player is doing. We're looking for songs that are way more balanced for four players." With the backing of powerhouses like MTV and EA, and an established success story from Guitar Hero, Harmonix has a wealth of advantages behind them in garnering strong song licenses and, perhaps more importantly, the money to purchase them. The songs in the game represent the full history of rock, from the earliest genesis of '60s tunes to emerging top-of-the-charts hits. We got to play 10 full songs with the full four part band during our visit to Harmonix, but only four of them were finalized licenses that are definitely in the game.

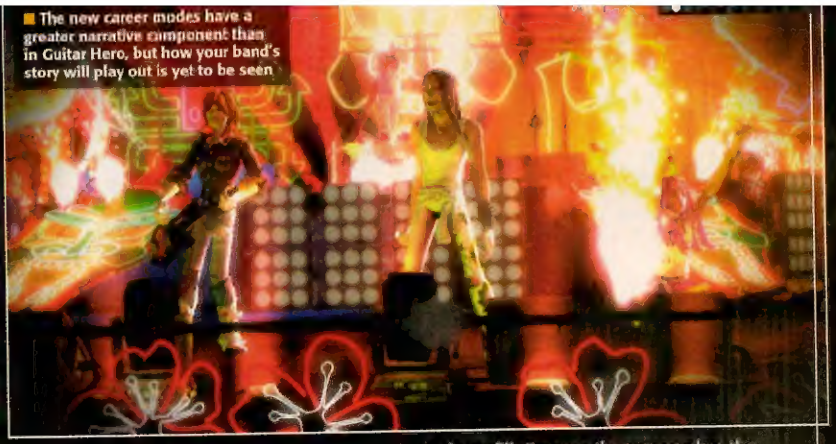
Weezer – Say It Ain't So (Original Master Track)
Black Sabbath – Paranoid
The Who – Won't Get Fooled Again (Original Master Track)
Nirvana – In Bloom (Original Master Track)

These four songs represent a sampling of Harmonix's larger strategy. From the remarkable drum beats in "Won't Get Fooled Again" to singing along to the drawling tones of Kurt Cobain's melodic lines, there's a focus on genre variety and familiar tunes that you'll recognize and want to play. "Whenever possible, we're going after the original multi-track master recordings," Rigopulos informs us. "We're going after recording artists that have until now really been off limits for video games."

As for the other songs we got to play on our visit, it's fair to say that those on the revealed list definitely aren't the only gigantic names you'll be seeing. Further, Harmonix wants to put a huge focus on downloadable content this time around. From single songs to releasing an entire album from one band, they're hoping to use Rock Band as a new avenue through which the public can interact with old music they love, and new music they've never heard. "We want to fundamentally change the way people think about music," Egozy theorizes. "Rock Band is going to be used to launch new indie bands. There will be bands who become famous because of the game Rock Band." And while the disc's song list will focus on the various rock traditions, Harmonix is very open to exploring new genres in their downloadable content. Whether that means we'll be seeing country, jazz, blues, pop or anything else is a question that will be answered only by how successful the game is, and what exactly the fans begin to cry out for.



■ You'll craft your own band logo, and the individual members of your band will show up in the background of loading screens between songs



■ The new career modes have a greater narrative component than in Guitar Hero, but how your band's story will play out is yet to be seen

detector will pick up the indi-
vels and consonants that you
nly does this encourage getting
right, but it lets the game offer
ed pitch-free speaking and
that is so core to rock singing.
enough highly judged phrases
get a free-form passage to
lf your meter's high enough,
these free zones will trigger
r. Beyond that, any band vocal-
how boring long instrumental
get. To address this, the mic
s the vocalist's own personal
ne in many songs. Single note
scroll left to be hit at the
ment, and suddenly you're the
ercussionist as you tap away
ic head. "They might even be
hrases," Egozy hints.

are the only fundamentally
eplay mechanic in the game,
ard to overstate how awesome
For as many people who have

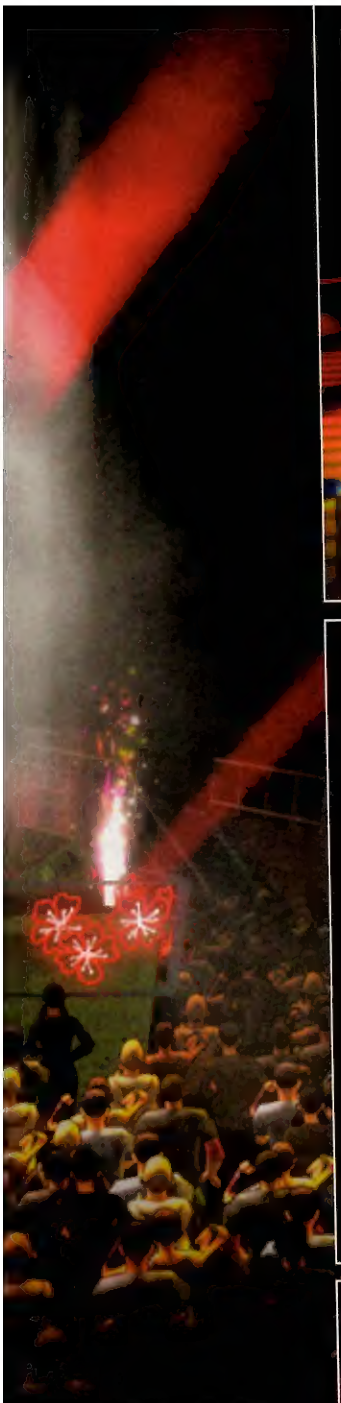
wailed on an air guitar, there are just as many who have banged away on the car steering wheel as if they were god's gift to rhythm. For all those wannabe drummers, this is your game. Going far beyond other previous attempts to emulate drumming, the feeling here is remarkably close to the real thing. With drum sticks in hand, you hit each pad in front of you as the corresponding gem descends on screen. In addition to the four colored gems, a line will often cross underneath all of them that indicates it's time to hit the kick pedal – just like with the gems, you'll hit the pedal at the moment that the descending line reaches the base of the screen. Like every drummer who's ever picked up sticks, you'll have to keep your hands and feet independent, learn the basic patterns of rock drumming, and, as if that weren't enough, learn how to rock a drum fill. Frequently, as you play, the gems will disappear to be replaced by a free form section. It's your chance to throw down like Animal from the Muppets, or craft your own unique and intricate rhythmic passage. At the end of each drum fill, a special green gem descends on your right. Hit that for the final crash of your fill, and you've just deployed your own version of star power.

Unlike in previous games, with so many players working cooperatively, it would suck if one person's failure brought the whole band down. Instead, if you fail out your track will now go gray, and you won't be able to play any more. However, if your band mates are smart, one of them will deploy star power. Instead of giving him or her a huge multiplier, the action will instead pull you and any other failed players back into the song. If you can all reach the end together, in many songs you'll be greeted

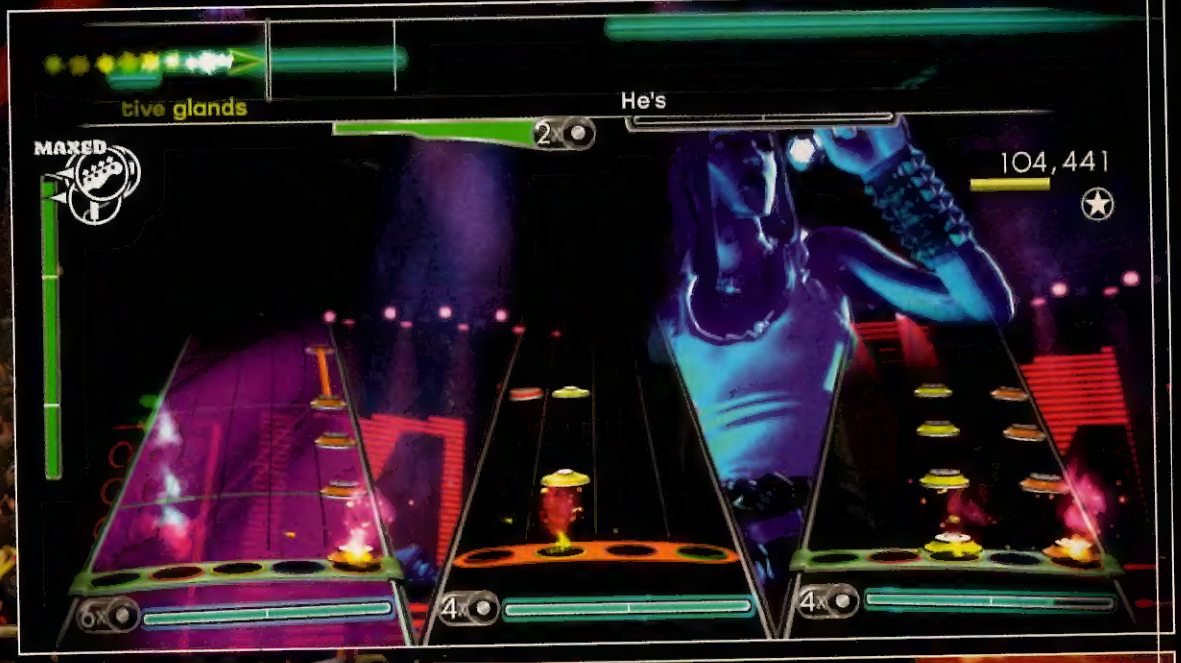
by the Big Rock Ending – a huge free-form passage for all the players that ends with a jump-in-the-air, guitar-smashing, amp-exploding crash.

Like any good band, you'll want to customize your style to say something about who you are. "For us, this game is about living out rock star fantasies," Rigopolus says. To this end, a brand new character creation system lets you craft your own unique avatar. Each avatar you make will play a particular instrument or sing, so you may make several for your different runs through the game. You'll set their gender, height, and physique as well as picking a face and hairstyle. Beyond the return of licensed guitars, pedals, and other rock paraphernalia, you'll also now have four themed clothing and accessory stores to outfit your character – Punk, Metal, Goth, and Classic Rock. Mix and match hundreds of pieces of clothing, jewelry, and tattoos from each of the four shops to create your own stand-apart rocker. Finally, a full set of motion-captured stage movements have been included for each of the four major genres on each instrument – you'll pick one to show off whether your musician rolls like Axl or stands his ground like Clapton. Alternately, in Quick Play mode you can choose between dozens of pre-fab characters that might strike your fancy. Whatever your choice, your band will perform in a hugely expanded array of venues – there are around 40 performance spaces planned right now.

Whether alone or with friends, or online with strangers on the other side of the country, Rock Band is just a step to broadening a genre and b people closer to the music. "Whil is a culmination of 12 years of ex ence, in another sense it's really beginning," Rigopulos opines. "T the game that we hope can rees the context for the music game and serve as the beginning for t 10 years of music games." The c Rock Band is amazing, and havi played it, we know it is just as e as we hoped. Even so, it's a lev



■ Sorry, bassists, your parts can be a little too repetitive to make for a full career, but at least you can play solo bass in quick play mode



■ The peripherals will be unique to each platform: "If we had our druthers, the peripherals would work across all platforms," CEO Alex Rigopulos says. "The tech would work, but there are special circuits that Microsoft requires that other console manufacturers don't"

kely to come cheap. While no
ling to talk prices yet, outfit-
band with peripherals of this
a scary concept. Then again, it
oped that the spirit of coopera-
odied by the band concept can
s pool resources and experi-
k Band the way it should be
with four people. Whatever cost
ists, it'll be a hard purchase to
n. Rock Band has every sign of
definitive party game experi-
2008. ■■■